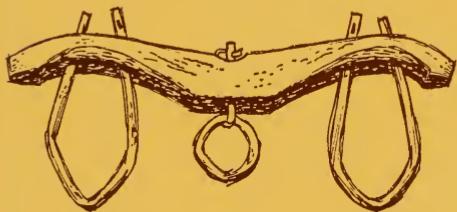


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All Address

By

Edgar S. Vaught

United States District Judge

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma



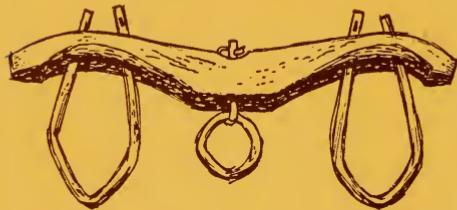
Delivered Before

The Lincoln Club

At the California Club

Los Angeles, California, February 12, 1937

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Abraham Lincoln—The Statesman

WE have met this evening to do honor to the memory of one of America's greatest leaders—Abraham Lincoln.

It is impossible to review all phases of Lincoln's life and achievements in the limited time at my disposal, and it is therefore my purpose to limit my remarks to the record of this great leader as a statesman.

It is a long journey from a log cabin to the White House and the last stages of that journey are directly affected by the first. Lincoln's early life had powerful influence upon his later life. No career in our national history so powerfully typifies the possibilities and opportunities of the American youth. A brief reference to his early life, therefore, will serve as a preface to a discussion of his later achievements.

The early life of Lincoln is perhaps better known to the people of America as a whole than that of any other of our great leaders. He was born in a log cabin, in abject poverty. His parents, both of Virginia birth, immigrated to Kentucky in the latter part of the 18th century. His father, fatherless at the age of six years, was left with a penniless mother and became a wandering, laboring boy, and never knew the advantages of even a common school education, writing his own name in a most bungling manner.

Lincoln came into the world amid surroundings which gave little encouragement to even a desire for an education or to possess the ordinary conveniences of life.

When a boy of eight years, his father moved to Indiana and the sum total of the lad's educational achievements until he had reached the age of twenty-one, was the ability to "read,

write and cipher to the rule of three." About this time, he moved to the state of Illinois, worked at odd jobs, and with this background and the limitations of this equipment for life, began a career which was to be a source of pride to his state and nation.

He was powerful physically and possessed a massive brain. His love for information inspired him to read books of value, history, philosophy, mathematics, including the Bible, Shakespeare, and the like. I know of no man of Lincoln's early surroundings and limited education who has ever equaled Lincoln in becoming a man well informed upon so many subjects.

Before he was thirty years of age, he had served as surveyor for his county and three terms in the State Legislature. His legislative experience seems to have marked the beginning of a rapidly developing career. At this period, he literally devoured books. He read during the day when his duties permitted and often all night long.

He cared little for dress, and frequently became so engrossed in his reading that he forgot even his meals.

He became conscious of the fact that the United States of America was developing into a powerful nation. The study of constitutional government, our national Constitution, and the events leading to its formation and adoption, fascinated him.

So engrossed did he become in the study of these subjects that frequently he became almost unconscious of the presence of his friends.

He was regarded in his early days at Springfield as one of ordinary ability and of little promise. However, he was pos-

sessed of absolute honesty, high personal integrity, a well developed sense of humor, and the ability to tell a good story, which made him a welcome guest in almost any gathering.

The period from 1850 to 1860 constituted a crisis in our national history. Slavery agitation had assumed such proportions throughout the nation that it became the one topic of discussion by public men, and the attitude of public men on the question of slavery determined their course in national politics.

That which rapidly brought this important question to additional prominence was the desire of the friends of slavery to extend slavery into the border territories of the United States. Those opposed to slavery had consistently taken the position that Congress had the right to determine whether or not slavery should exist in the territories of the United States. Those representing the slave states took the position that, since the Constitution was silent on the question, neither Congress nor the people of the territories themselves had the right to interfere with the extension of slavery into the territories.

The repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill and the admission of Kansas, also emphasized and made more delicate this serious question.

Stephen A. Douglas, likewise a citizen of Illinois and Springfield, a strong personal friend of Lincoln, a senator from Illinois and one of the most distinguished, able and talented men of his age, both in the United States Senate and in the public forum, advocated a doctrine known as "popular sovereignty." Douglas took the position that the people of the territories themselves had the right to determine whether or not slavery should exist in the territories.

In 1855 there occurred between Lincoln and Douglas perhaps the ablest and most effective series of debates that has ever occurred in our national history. The issue leading up to these debates was whether Kansas should be admitted as a free or slave state.

It was no idle political question which could be decided one way or the other and in a short time forgotten. It was a question which affected not only the South and the North, the friends of slavery and the friends of anti-slavery, but it was a question that in a large measure determined the permanence of the American Union.

Lincoln, not limiting his position to the local question of the admission of Kansas as a slave or free state, went further and took the position that slavery as an institution was wrong. That a slave was an individual—a person; that he possessed certain inherent rights which should be respected by the government in which he lived; and, that to enslave a human being and treat him merely as personal property was an outrage on human justice.

He went further in this series of debates, taking the position that the national government and the people of this nation should determine whether or not the institution of slavery, whether confined to the territories, northern states, or slave states, should continue.

In 1856 Buchanan was elected President. Both houses of Congress had a clear majority in support of the new President. President Buchanan, while living in a free state, was more or less sympathetic with the institution of slavery but largely for political reasons. He was reluctant to take a positive stand and was influenced by powerful friends from the slave states.

Shortly after the inauguration of President Buchanan, an event occurred which rocked the nation to its foundations. This was known as the Dred Scott decision. Dred Scott was a slave. He removed with his owner from a slave state to a free state, residing in the state of Illinois and the territory of Wisconsin, where slavery was prohibited by law. His master removed again to the state of Missouri and Dred Scott instituted an action in the Federal Court of Missouri to secure his freedom. A similar action had been instituted in the state court of Missouri and decided adversely to Scott.

The case was not of so much importance until it reached the Supreme Court of the United States. The friends of slavery and those antagonistic to the institution of slavery, realizing the importance of the decision of the United States court on this question, secured the ablest legal talent the nation afforded and the argument of this case before the Supreme Court revived intense feeling for and against slavery throughout the nation.

This decision held in effect that the Federal Court was without jurisdiction, and was based upon the proposition that Dred Scott, being a negro, could not become a citizen of the United States or of any state, and therefore was not entitled to bring the action. After reaching this conclusion, the Court went further in its opinion, reviewed the entire slavery question and held that neither Congress nor the people of a territory belonging to the United States had the power to prohibit slavery in a territory and that a state carved from one of those territories and admitted to the Union came into the Union automatically as a slave state.

This broad, yet positive, decision by the Supreme Court of the United States established a new position by the national government.

Mr. Lincoln criticized this decision and yet, his criticism was not a criticism of the Court as such nor did he take the position that the decision of the Court should not be followed or respected, but he did take the position that the Supreme Court had overlooked and perhaps misstated material facts upon which this decision was based, and that therefore he had hopes, that upon more mature deliberation, the Court would change its position.

In the Dred Scott opinion, the Court used this expression, "the right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution." Lincoln took the position that there was nothing in the Constitution which justified this statement of fact but that "distinctly" and "expressly" were very definite words, and that the language of the Constitution was not susceptible of such an interpretation.

It was only natural, therefore, in 1858 when Douglas was nominated by his party for re-election to the United States Senate that Lincoln should be selected as his opponent by the opposing party. The nomination of these two giants for the important position of United States Senator attracted the attention of the entire nation.

As a congressman in 1846 Lincoln had introduced a resolution to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. His position therefore was well known. In 1858, before the convention at Springfield which had nominated him as its candidate for United States Senator, he delivered an address which forced the issue of slavery to a final and permanent decision. And in that famous address he said:

"If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident prom-

ise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new—North as well as South.”

He furthermore challenged the position of Mr. Douglas on “popular sovereignty.” He asked how Mr. Douglas’s theory could be maintained, that slavery in a territory could be determined by popular sovereignty, when the Supreme Court of the United States had held that neither Congress nor the people of the territory had the power to exclude slavery.

This series of debates, during the senatorial campaign, challenged the thoughtful attention of the American people. Who was this unknown Lincoln? This rugged, crude specimen of humanity, emanating from the nowhere, challenging the position of the educated, cultured, polished, able statesman, the Senator from Illinois. He attracted attention throughout the North and the South, and the people, it seems, for the first time began to realize the seriousness of the slavery question and what it might mean to the nation. Feeling ran high; personal encounters were frequent. And men, eminent in church and state, mounted platforms throughout the nation, defending and condemning the institution of slavery.

My purpose in referring to this important question is merely for the purpose of demonstrating the high character of Lincoln and the position that he took upon this great national question.

Lincoln had little hope of defeating Douglas and in his reference in later years to this famous contest, he stated that he had little hope of being elected to the Senate and he had taken this position, not for the purpose of being advanced politically, but that this question was of such vital importance and meant so much to this rising young nation, that the time had come when it must be settled. He took the position, frankly, that while he was opposed to slavery and believed it was wrong in principle, yet it would be much better for the nation to have the question settled even though it resulted in a nation of slavery, rather than remain a nation divided into free and slave states.

Senator Douglas was the avowed candidate for the nomination of his party for the presidency in 1860. In fact it was conceded that he was the most powerful candidate of his party for the high position.

After the defeat of Lincoln for the United States Senate, he did not drop from the public eye. It may be said that Lincoln was ambitious. But Lincoln had no thought in 1858, when he was engaged in this powerful debate with Douglas, of being a candidate for the presidency in 1860.

The address of Lincoln which, perhaps more than any other, influenced his nomination for President, was the famous address at Cooper Institute, New York City. He was invited to deliver an address and on this occasion he took advantage of the opportunity to express, completely and fully, without

the slightest evasion, his position on this great question. He said:

“No one who has sworn to support the Constitution can conscientiously vote for what he understands to be an unconstitutional measure, however expedient he may think it; but one may or ought to vote against a measure which he deems constitutional if at the same time he deems it inexpedient.”

In this famous address, he quoted from Thomas Jefferson as follows:

“It is still in our power to direct the progress of emancipation and deportation peaceably, and in such slow degrees as that the evil will wear off insensibly; and their places be, *pari passu*, filled up by free white laborers. If, on the contrary, it is left to force itself on, human nature must shudder at the prospect held up.”

In the same address, in discussing the Dred Scott opinion, and after taking the position that there was nothing in the Constitution which justified the statement that “the right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution,” he said:

“When this obvious mistake of the judges shall be brought to their notice, is it not reasonable to expect that they will withdraw the mistaken statement and reconsider the conclusion based upon it?”

In this connection it might not be out of place to remark that it is rather a delicate matter to criticize the highest court of our land. However, it is within the right of a citizen so to do but that criticism should be pitched upon such a high plane as to be a criticism of the opinion or decision of that Court, stating reasons why, and not such a criticism as will cause the public to lose confidence in an important department of our government.

Lincoln's attitude, therefore, in whatever criticism he made of the Supreme Court, or of its opinion, was of such a high character that even the members of the Court could not take offense.

At this point it must be remembered that the guns of slavery were turned upon Lincoln. Bitter criticism was made throughout the land because of his attitude, but in closing the Cooper Union speech, he said :

“Neither let us be slandered from our duty by false accusations against us nor frightened from it by menaces of destruction to the government or of dungeons to ourselves. Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it.”

I refer to the slavery question, not because I want to revive that issue for I speak to you as the son of a Confederate soldier, but my sole purpose is to show what the position of a real statesman was when a question of vital importance to the nation was before the public for consideration and was an issue in a national campaign.

Lincoln's nomination and election to the presidency were the natural outgrowth of his consistent position on this great question before the American people.

In assuming the duties of this great office, Lincoln recognized his limitations. In letters to his friends and in statements to those who knew him best, he frequently admitted that he was not an educated man, that he had had no such advantages for education and culture as his friend, Mr. Douglas. He knew that his opportunities for social development and culture had been extremely limited but he was impressed with the responsibilities that were placed upon his shoulders and he

recognized further that there was no opportunity for retreat when duty demands a forward step.

In the selection of his cabinet, he was not influenced by political obligations, for he had none, but he filled his cabinet with the ablest men of his party, most of whom had been opposed to his candidacy and some of whom had little personal respect for him as President.

An incident that occurred shortly after his inauguration illustrates not only the diplomacy of Lincoln but also his self-confidence and power. Within thirty days after his election there was submitted to him, by the leader of his cabinet, a document entitled "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration," outlining a policy for the President to follow and indicating that in the consideration of those momentous questions some individual should be given the authority to take the lead. This famous document was never made public until after Lincoln's death. He treated it as a profound secret and retained this member of his cabinet.

The substances of this document might be stated as follows: "The policies which I have outlined should be put into immediate effect and it must be the business of someone incessantly to pursue it." And the document actually contained this expression: "It is not in my especial province. But I neither seek to evade nor assume responsibility."

The document could be further construed to mean—after a month's trial, you, Mr. Lincoln, are a failure as President. The country is in desperate straits, and must use a desperate remedy. Some new man must take the executive helm, and wield the undivided presidential authority. I should have been nominated at Chicago, and elected in November, but am willing to take your place and perform your duties.

With a dignity characteristic of the President, he answered this code of presidential procedure, with a polite note and that note contained the following:

“If this must be done, I must do it. When a general line of policy is adopted, I apprehend there is no danger of its being changed without good reason, or continuing to be a subject of unnecessary debate; still, upon points arising in its progress I wish, and suppose I am entitled to have, the advice of all the cabinet.”

Some weeks later this same cabinet member, who had assumed voluntarily the responsibility of carrying out the work of the President’s administration, wrote to a friend as follows: “There is but one vote in the cabinet, and that is cast by the President.” And when he sent this same cabinet member to the Hampton Roads conference at the close of the war, he finished his letter of instructions with a rather significant sentence: “You will not assume to definitely consummate anything.”

We should therefore not be led into the false position that Mr. Lincoln was unstable as an executive. One of his biographers states, after reviewing the incident to which I have just referred: “This mastery Mr. Lincoln retained with a firm dignity throughout his administration.”

No President has ever been faced with the problems with which Lincoln was faced during his administration. He saw the stability of his beloved Union threatened by a cruel civil war. He saw friend turned against friend in civil strife. He saw a struggle in which father took up arms against son, brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor, and yet through it all he held before him like a mighty star directing his every step, the one purpose from which there was not the slightest deviation, the preservation of the American Union.

It was not uncommon for Lincoln to yield to tears and entreaty. He saw soldier boys in both armies lying upon the battlefield. He saw them in prison. He knew the motive responsible for the dreadful war and he knew that the thousands of youths, who had enlisted in a moment of patriotic fervor, had done so without comprehending the magnitude of the question before the American Nation. He was criticized and villified as perhaps no man in public life had ever been. He bore this load and his responsibilities in a meek and serious manner. He loved his nation; he loved the South because he was the son of the South but he loved his Union more.

Henry Watterson, in his famous address, said:

“One thinks now that the world in which Abraham Lincoln lived might have dealt more gently by such a man. He was himself so gentle—so upright in nature and so broad of mind—so sunny and so tolerant in temper—so simple and so unaffected in bearing—a rude exterior covering an undaunted spirit, proving by his every act and word that—

The bravest are the tenderest,

The loving are the daring.

Though he was a party leader, he was a typical and patriotic American, in whom even his enemies might have found something to respect and admire. But it could not be so. He committed one grievous offense; he dared to think and he was not afraid to speak; he was far in advance of his party and his time; and men are slow to forgive what they do not readily understand.”

In November 1863 Lincoln was invited to deliver an address at the dedication of the Gettysburg Battlefield. A great American orator was to deliver the principal address and doubtless Lincoln was invited more as a matter of courtesy and respect for the position he held than that he might be able

to deliver an address which would be worthwhile. This famous orator spent weeks in preparation and delivered his address, which was eloquent, beautifully written and which charmed his hearers. Lincoln, knowing the circumstances under which he was invited, on his train going up to Gettysburg, scribbled with a pencil on rough paper, a short address which took him less than three minutes to deliver and which he believed to have been an absolute failure. The significance and importance of his address he did not fully realize until the American press published it from ocean to ocean, the following day. He did not realize that when he wrote this short message, it was the heart and very soul of Abraham Lincoln that he penned into these immortal words. No address in all history has produced the profound effect that Lincoln's Gettysburg Address made. In analyzing this address statesmen and literary critics have done their best but not one word can they change.

Mr. Watterson beautifully expresses the sentiment when he said:

“Where did he get his style? Ask Shakespeare and Burns where they got their style. Where did he get his grasp upon affairs and his knowledge of men? Ask the Lord God who created miracles in Luther and Bonaparte!”

* * * * *

“The Gettysburg address has innumerable counterparts, as far as mere style goes. But there needs to be no further proof that the man who could scribble such a composition as that with a lead pencil on a pad in a railway carriage was the equal of any man who ever wrote his mother tongue. As conclusive example—as short as it is sublime—let me read it to you. Like a chapter of Holy Writ, it can never grow old or stale:

“‘Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in lib-

erty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

“ ‘Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

“ ‘But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us: that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.’ ”

And may I quote in conclusion again from Mr. Watters-
son:

“Tried by this standard, where shall we find an example so impressive as Abraham Lincoln, whose career might be chanted by a Greek chorus as at once the prelude and the epilogue of the most imperial theme of modern times?

“Born as lowly as the Son of God, in a hovel; reared in penury, squalor, with no gleam of light or fair surround-
ing; without graces, actual or acquired; without name or fame or official training; it was reserved for this strange

being, late in life, to be snatched from obscurity, raised to supreme command at a supreme moment, and intrusted with the destiny of a nation.

“The great leaders of his party, the most experienced and accomplished public men of the day, were made to stand aside; were sent to the rear; whilst this fantastic figure was led by unseen hands to the front and given the reins of power. It is immaterial whether we were for him, or against him; wholly immaterial. That, during four years, carrying with them such a weight of responsibility as the world never witnessed before, he filled the vast space allotted him in the eyes and actions of mankind, is to say that he was inspired of God, for nowhere else could he have acquired the wisdom and the virtue.

“Where did Shakespeare get his genius? Where did Mozart get his music? Whose hand smote the lyre of the Scottish plowman, and stayed the life of the German priest? God, God, and God alone; and as surely as these were raised up by God, inspired by God, was Abraham Lincoln; and a thousand years hence, no drama, no tragedy, no epic poem will be filled with greater wonder, or be followed by mankind with deeper feeling than that which tells the story of his life and death.”





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